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Linda J. Cook, "Coal Miners' Strike"



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Lessons of Soviet Coal Miners' Strike of Summer 1989

by Linda J. Cook

Introduction

The most dramatic and significant labor unrest of the Gorbachev period erupted among coal miners in the summer of 1989. Beginning on July 10 in the Western Siberian Kuznetsk Basin (Kuzbass), the unrest spread to the Donetsk Basin (Donbass) in the Ukraine, to the Arctic city of Vorkuta, and to other regions, involving some half million Soviet miners by late July. The strikes spawned grassroots leadership and organization, including *oblast*-level committees which coordinated actions, worked out unified demands, and bargained on behalf of the strikers. The miners largely bypassed local trade union and party cadres, and apparently eschewed efforts of other political groups to assume a role in the strikes. Their movement was self-mobilized and thus gives us rare access to authentic workers' voices, largely unadulterated by official formulations. The record of their grievances and demands provides important information about miners' attitudes, both toward Gorbachev's reforms and toward broader issues of social and economic policy.

The miners' strikes also allow, indeed compel us, to reexamine some common assumptions about Soviet workers. Soviet specialists have tended to view blue collar workers as more or less comfortably dependent on the Brezhnev-era welfare state. Long accustomed to the 'social contract' which guaranteed full employment, stable prices, and subsidized social services, workers were expected to oppose marketizing reforms which threatened their security. They were cast as a conservative stratum, likely to strike against reform.¹ Evidence

from the summer strikes flies in the face of these expectations: here coal miners, a predominantly blue collar group, demonstrated broad support for the core features of Gorbachev's reform program, i.e., enterprise independence and self-financing. How can we explain the miners' pro-reform agenda, and how should it alter our assumptions about Soviet workers? We will return to these questions after considering the development of the strike movement and the miners' demands.

The Coal Strikes: Economic Background Factors

The coal strikes were partly fueled by worsening conditions in the social spheres of mining regions. By late 1988, the reforms had caused general deterioration of supplies, price stability, and distribution networks throughout the Soviet consumer sector. The effects of this deterioration were especially acute in some of the mining regions. In the Ukraine (which includes the Donbass), during the several months preceding the strike retail prices were increasing, the output of inexpensive necessities was shrinking, the gap between purchasing power and the availability of goods was widening, and shoppers were experiencing unaccustomed shortages and stoppages in sales of essential goods. The soap shortage, which was to become a symbol of the miners' grievances, was itself largely a result of the reform's dysfunctions: rumors about planned price increases had led to increased demand, then panic buying and hoarding of soap.² In



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October, 1988, the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party reported deterioration in the supply of livestock produce to the population and acute shortages of meat and dairy products.³ In its January 1989, examination of the republic's social and economic development, the Ukrainian Council of Ministers reported poor progress in construction of housing, facilities for health service and education, and new production facilities in light and local industries which produce non-food consumer goods.⁴ There is ample evidence that such problems extended as well to other mining regions, where they were often superimposed on a poorly-developed base of social services and amenities.⁵

Reform policies also caused problems for miners in the production sphere. New cost accounting procedures sometimes meant loss of wages or bonuses because of conditions beyond the miners' control, most commonly transport inadequacies.⁶ The coal basins had been transferred to self-financing in January 1988, in spite of the fact that much of the sector had long operated at a loss and that state price controls perpetuated the mines' unprofitability. Loss-makers were especially concentrated in the Donbass, the oldest of the mining regions, which suffered from a long-term lack of state investment, obsolete technology, exhausted mines, and declining output.⁷ Under self-financing, these mines faced the potential threat of insolvency and closure. At the same time, the mines' administrations could not raise coal prices as long as the old price controls remained in effect, (or even boost profitability by changing their product mix and increasing output of expensive "improved" goods, the common ruse for manufacturers of consumer goods), and the ministry continued to control the levels and disposition of output. But if the regime's half-hearted implementation of reform was exacerbating problems in the coal basins, we will see that the miners saw an opportunity to resolve those problems through genuine implementation of the reform policies, and struck in part to support, indeed to demand, those policies.

The Coal Strikes: Political Background Factors

Glasnost also contributed to the miners' mobilization. Mining is by nature hard and dirty work, but the policy of 'openness' brought to light the extraordinarily poor, difficult, and dangerous working conditions of Soviet miners. Press exposés, official reports, and special investigations focused on the coal industry, detailing its worn and obsolete equipment, lack of safety regulations and procedures, the poor health of miners in comparison with other sectors of the population, and the ecological devas-

tation of the basins. In the fall of 1988, *Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia* ran a series titled, "Life of a Miner," detailing these hardships.⁸ In early 1989, an official of the Mining Safety Inspectorate published a long article in *Ekonomicheskaiia Gazeta*, providing statistics and specific information about working conditions, citing figures from a Special Collegium of the USSR Prosecutor's Office on the high rate of occupational injuries and violations of safety regulations in the coal industry.⁹ Commissions, sent to mining settlements to investigate fatalities, publicized reports on local conditions contributing to accidents and recommended dismissal of responsible managers. Ecological issues, including air quality, chemical contamination, and the detrimental effects of pollution on the health of miners and their children, came to the fore as major issues. All this discussion and attention no doubt contributed to the common consciousness of grievances in the mining communities, and more importantly, defined these grievances for the first time as legitimate political issues.

The democratization of politics also forms an important part of the background to the strike. In March, 1989, the first elections allowing for some popular initiative and competition were held to choose delegates to the Congress of People's Deputies. *Obkom* secretaries suffered some of their heaviest defeats in mining regions,¹⁰ defeats that at once indicated the depth of dissatisfaction concentrated in these regions, and demonstrated clearly that Gorbachev would tolerate popular repudiation of party leaders. Moreover, mining towns and settlements were able to elect their own deputies, in many cases rank-and-file workers or individuals with histories of opposition to the political establishment. The elections and convening of the legislature thus provided the miners with both assured access to the national leadership through their deputies, and a new and potentially receptive audience for their actions and demands. The summer strikes in fact coincided with the first meeting of the newly empowered Supreme Soviet, and deputies from mining regions played an important role in presenting and defending the strikers' grievances in Moscow. Finally, in early May, the government proposed a draft Law on the Rights of Trade Unions, including a tentative right to strike, placing workers' interests and rights squarely at the center of the national political agenda.¹¹

Development of the Strike Movement: Spring 1989

Open discontent among Soviet coal miners was first reported in March and April, 1989. It took the form of localized strikes which usually involved a single pit and

limited demands for better wages and working conditions. About a dozen strikes were reported during the spring months. They affected the Kuzbass, Donbass, Vorkuta, and Norilsk, lasting from several hours to several days. The largest by far included 1000 miners.¹² The leadership responded by sending high-level officials to meet with the aggrieved workers; Coal Industry Minister Shchadov, Nonferrous Metallurgy Minister Durasov, and Chair of the State Committee on Labor and Social Questions Gladkiy, were all sent out to settle various of the strikes.¹³ The center's representatives typically recognized that the miners' demands were justified, and made, or at least promised, concessions on most issues.

While the spring strikes remained limited in terms of their size and demands, they nevertheless represented an escalation over the sporadic, localized strikes seen in earlier stages of the reform, for several reasons. First, they were concentrated in a single sector and made very similar demands; so while still localized, they no longer had the disconnected pattern of the earlier strikes. Secondly, the miners displayed a much stronger anti-administrative bias, often calling not only for dismissals of directors but also for substantial reductions in managerial and technical personnel. Finally, while the earlier strikes were settled by local authorities, those in the mining regions commanded central intervention. Striking miners were generally contemptuous toward their official trade unions and other "social organizations," and bypassed all local and regional authorities (party, soviet, and industrial) to negotiate with emissaries from the center.

In fact, the miners struck only after having petitioned local authorities in vain. In turn, the common inertia and indecision of union and other local officials in the face of the strikes further discredited these authorities. M. A. Srebnyi, Chairman of the Coal Industry Workers' Union, admitted that, "The strikes have shaken both the directors and the trade union leaders."¹⁴ The crisis of authority would deepen. In June Kuzbass miners sent collective petitions to Moscow. Still receiving no response, they set a strike deadline.

The Mass Strikes of Summer 1989

The summer coal strikes began on July 10, in the mining city of Mezhdurechensk in the Western Siberian Kuznetsk Basin (see map below), where 1,000 miners stopped work and presented a list of 30 demands. Within a week the strike had spread to eight additional Kuzbass cities, involved more than 100,000 miners, and closed

down virtually the entire coal basin.¹⁵ The miners demonstrated in town squares where they were often joined by others from the local population, maintained order, discussed their grievances, and elected representatives to local strike committees. They also organized an *oblast*-level strike committee headed by T. Avaliani, an enterprise deputy director (and recently-elected People's Deputy) who had suffered under Brezhnev for proposing the infirm and incompetent General Secretary's retirement.¹⁶

In the next several days, the Kemorovo Oblast Strike Committee met with two high-level commissions sent by Moscow: the first, headed by Minister Shchadov and AUCCTU Chair Shalayev, to discuss the miners' immediate demands; the second, chaired by Central Committee Secretary N. Slyunkov, to look into the *oblast*'s broader socio-economic problems.¹⁷ The miners also instructed their deputies to address the Supreme Soviet on their behalf, and the strikes filled a substantial part of the legislature's agenda in mid-July. By July 20, a 36-point protocol had been signed by members of both commissions and the *oblast* strike committee, promising fulfillment of most of the miners' demands and specifying concrete deadlines and those responsible for fulfillment.¹⁷ Gorbachev reported to the Supreme Soviet on the Kuzbass strikes with qualified sympathy, and a telegram over the signatures of Gorbachev and Ryzhkov committed the leadership to the protocol.¹⁸ Avaliani's *oblast* committee called for an end to the strike, and on July 21 most Kuzbass miners were back at the coal faces.

The strike had, however, spread, on July 17 to the Donetsk Basin, on July 19th to Vorkuta in the Far Northern Pechora Basin, and on subsequent days to surrounding regions. Having begun as a regional strike, it now turned into an industry-wide one affecting the major coal mining areas of the Ukrainian, Kazakh, and Russian Republics.¹⁹ The breadth of the strike, which broke out in rapid sequence in cities and basins separated by hundreds and thousands of miles and interrupted most of the country's coal supply, created a national crisis. The leadership hastened to extend the Kuzbass settlement to all miners and mining regions, and promised to negotiate any additional grievances and demands. The miners demanded guarantees. After another round of meetings between regional strike committees and central emissaries, Supreme Soviet discussions, and assurances from Gorbachev and their local deputies, the Donbass, Vorkuta, Karaganda and other miners returned to work. By the end of July the strikes had abated everywhere, consignments of goods were arriving in mining settlements, some demands over pay and work regime had

Mining Regions With Major Strike Activity in Summer 1989



A Kuznetsk Basin (Western Siberia) B Donetsk Basin (Ukraine)
C Pechora Basin (Arctic circle) D Karaganda (Kazakhstan)

been met, and much else had been scheduled for delivery or discussion.

The national miners' strike of summer 1989 confronted both national and local leaders with unprecedented challenges. Gorbachev's government approached the strikes in the absence of any legal provisions or constituted procedures for arbitrating collective labor conflicts; indeed, the Soviet Union's first Draft Law on Labor Disputes was submitted to the Supreme Soviet during the strike.²⁰ The government developed *ad hoc* procedures, bending to the miners' insistence that highly-visible national leaders travel to the basins and negotiate with strike leaders, and providing multiple institutional guarantors, (i.e., the Council of

Ministers, AUCCTU, Soviets, and regional CPSU officials) to the settlements.

Local soviet, trade union, and party authorities were further, perhaps finally, discredited by the strike. Moscow's management of the negotiations left local authorities largely irrelevant to the settlement. National leaders criticized their local counterparts for having ignored the miners' accumulating grievances, and in many localities striking miners called for the resignation of local leaders and immediate new elections to party, soviet, trade union, and workers' committees. Condemnation of the trade unions was particularly harsh, including charges that the strike, "revealed the total bankruptcy of many trade union functionaries."²¹ In place of these authorities the strikes produced a new grass-roots leader-

from the government, and seemed generally able to control the rank-and-file. (i.e., to call an end to the strike.) They continued to function as workers' committees after the strikes had ended, monitoring fulfillment of the miners' demands and retaining the power to call new strikes if those demands were not met.

The Miners' Demands and Economic Reform

At first perusal the strikers' demands, which were presented to the government in lists of 30, 40, and more, seem to indicate that Soviet miners were aggrieved about everything — living conditions, work regime, the slow pace of reform, some of the effects of reform, management, and environmental pollution. A typical list included demands for improved pay, pensions, and holidays, better provision of food and industrial goods, more housing construction, consumer, municipal, and medical services, more investment in modernization of the mines, cuts in the administrative apparatus, more rights for labor collectives, as well as other political, ecological, and job-specific demands.²² Initially, most attention was focused on the fact that the miners supported the central element of the industrial reform — transition of their enterprises to economic autonomy and self-financing. Gorbachev, presiding over the Supreme Soviet when the strikes began, welcomed them as evidence of grassroots worker support for reform. However, careful assessment of the strikers' demands will show that they are both conditional and somewhat ambiguous in their support for reform.

The strikers' central demand was that their mines be transferred to economic independence and self-management by the labor collective, in accord with the provisions of the Law on the State Enterprise. But they also set a number of conditions for the transfer: increased coal prices; reduced plan targets (or state orders); the right to control disposition of above-plan output, including the right to market output abroad, retain foreign currency, and use it for local development; the right to manage profits; reduction of the managerial apparatus, and autonomy from the ministry.²³

Approval of the Law on the State Enterprise (June, 1987), and the ensuing discussions of cost accounting, self-financing, and potential insolvency for loss-making enterprises, had focused the miners' attention on their sector's sorry financial state and its sources. They realized (or learned) that their coal was valuable both at home and in hard currency markets, and that mines often made little or no profit because the state depressed domestic wholesale and retail prices below the cost of production

and kept hard currency earnings from foreign sales in the central budget. As a consequence, mining regions had few resources for either production or social development, and often had to depend on ministerial subsidies. As one report succinctly stated the miners' case: "miserly sums are left, by comparison with the solid profits earned, at the disposal of coal enterprises and the cities where they are located."²⁴

The miners saw an opportunity to resolve their problems through genuine enterprise autonomy and self-financing. Autonomy from ministerial *diktat* and state pricing restrictions would allow miners more control over pricing and marketing. They could raise artificially depressed domestic coal prices to cover the costs of production plus profits. They could also sell part of their output on the international market, earn hard currency, and use it to modernize production and improve social infrastructure and supplies of consumer goods. As an *Izvestiia* article on the strikes in the Kuzbass explained:

"The miners believe that they have the right to sell coal at contract prices . . . the prices for [coal] are such that enterprises . . . make low profits or a loss, and have insufficient funds for the renewal of equipment and technology and the accelerated development of housing construction and the social and consumer infrastructure. Therefore the demand is being advanced to grant coal industry enterprise collectives full economic independence and to increase deductions into the local budget."²⁵

In short, the miners thought they could make financial autonomy work to their advantage.

But, while the miners envisioned a self-supporting future, a significant part of their program amounted to short-term demands for improvements in delivery of traditional 'social contract' outputs, including subsidized consumer goods and social services, state investment in housing construction and technical renovation, and various benefits for rank-and-file production workers. They at the same time demanded conditions for the transition to self-financing (i.e., higher coal prices, lower production plans) which would unilaterally increase their sector's claims and advantage while raising energy costs for all domestic consumers. With the leadership's concessions to most of these demands, the miners were in effect promised more autonomy, higher coal prices, fewer production demands and more subsidies.

As economists soon began to point out, these concessions would mean increased strains on the general economy and budget. The package which Gorbachev promised the miners was estimated to cost more than two billion rubles,²⁶ and would contribute to both inflation and the deficit. Both Soviet leaders and scholars have looked upon the miners' strikes as evidence of unan-

ticipated support for reform among industrial workers, support which would likely strengthen Gorbachev and his policies. However, it seems to me that the implications for reform are ambiguous. The strikes do demonstrate worker support for core reform policies, but Gorbachev's settlement with the miners has also had high costs for the state budget, and for the center's already tenuous control over the reform process.

The Miners' Demands and the 'Social Contract'

A careful study of the summer strikes makes it clear that the miners' concerns ranged well beyond the current reform program. Many also harbored deep dissatisfactions with the pre-Gorbachev state's delivery on central aspects of the 'social contract,' particularly housing, medical care, and municipal services. Striking miners claimed insistently that their settlements suffered from problems which had accumulated in the sector over decades, "... neglect of the social sphere. ... long years of arrogant neglect of people's basic needs."²⁷ The Kemerovo Oblast Party Secretary echoed these claims, describing the Kuzbass as "a heavy industrial region [developed] without municipal amenities,"²⁸ and government and trade union officials acknowledged that deep and long-standing grievances about living standards underlay the miners' militance. Descriptions of conditions in mining cities and settlements support the claims of long-term neglect of the social sphere. Many miners lived in dilapidated housing, including barracks which had been built during the 30's and 40's for convicts and victims of repression (especially in the Polar regions.) The shortage of hospitals, nurseries, cultural institutions, and schools was characterized as 'catastrophic,' with schools in many towns operating indefinitely in multiple sessions. Municipal services in settlements were extremely poor, with water and electricity often supplied during limited hours and sewage inadequate. Pollution and related health problems were severe and medical care poor, with little available treatment for diseases and injuries common to miners.

Such claims of long-term neglect of the social sphere in the coal basins (and confirming descriptions) raise some questions about whether the Brezhnev-era 'social contract' extended to the whole of the Soviet working class. Of course, we realize that the quality of services provided by Brezhnev's welfare state was universally poor, and that many of the miners' grievances (i.e., inadequate housing, poor health care) are common throughout Soviet society. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the miners benefitted considerably less

from the 'social contract' than some other groups of workers, particularly those in urban regions of the Western RSFSR and Ukraine. For example, an official report to the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party in August 1989 provided the following statistics on housing conditions and municipal amenities for Donbass miners: 20% of residences lacked running water; 26% were not connected to a sewage system; 28% lacked central heating; 63% lacked hot water; 49% lacked gas.²⁹ By contrast, Mervyn Matthews' study of poor (i.e., low *per capita* wage) Soviet emigre families from urban areas found that virtually all had running water, sanitation, gas and electricity, while higher percentages (85% and 68% respectively) had central heating and hot water.³⁰ Thus we see that, although miners enjoy relatively high wages, their housing conditions are markedly inferior to those of even poor urban families. While more comprehensive statistics would be needed to make the case conclusively, the above data on amenities indicates that coal miners have long been less than full beneficiaries of state spending for social provision.

There are other reasons to think that the mining settlements were relatively deprived of funds for social services and infrastructure even during the Brezhnev period. Beginning in the early 1960s, Soviet energy policy turned away from primary dependence on coal to much heavier reliance on oil and gas. Planners also shifted investment within the coal industry, away from the old and exhausted Donbass mines to the newer coal fields of the Kuzbass, while declining labor productivity and increasing transport costs strained resources throughout the industry. As a consequence, the Donbass was seriously deprived of funding and suffered deterioration of both production facilities and social infrastructure, contributing to dangerous working conditions and poor health. At the same time, production in the Kuzbass was built up rapidly, with little investment in the social sphere. As the population grew, shortages of housing, schools, health care and other service facilities became acute.³¹

The above discussion strongly suggests that the Brezhnev-era 'social contract' did not extend evenly to all sectors of the Soviet labor force. Coal miners were relatively deprived of state spending for social and cultural provision over an extended period. The miners did benefit from high wages and stable employment (whereas a competitive, profit-driven economy would likely have closed down many Donbass mines), but in comparison with other Soviet workers they were provided with poor living conditions and social services. We have long recognized inequalities in Soviet society, but have tended to regard the 'social contract' as a more-or-less undifferentiated deal for workers. The striking

miners' claims suggest that there have been large and prolonged disparities in the state's delivery of benefits to different sectors of the working class, disparities which may in turn affect levels of suppressed discontent among different groups of workers. One senses that the miners are much more deeply aggrieved about their accumulated problems, and much less interested in statist solutions, than their worker-activist counterparts in Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad.

Continuing Unrest in the Coal Basins

The conclusion of the miners' strikes in early August left a tense atmosphere in the country's coal basins. A kind of dual power structure emerged in most mining towns, with local party, soviet, and trade union authorities on one side, workers' strike committees on the other. Already discredited, local officials were now faced with mass votes of no confidence, sometimes replaced by new elections, and often effectively supplanted by the strike committees. Mining management was also on the defensive, against both blame for past deficiencies and the miners' insistence on cutting and re-organizing managerial staffs. Distrust and disputes between management and strike committees arose often, sometimes paralyzing managers and everywhere obstructing the return to a normal pace of work.³² Most importantly, strike committees retained the right to call for renewed work stoppages if the agreement between government and miners was not honored. The July protocol was formalized as Council of Ministers Resolution No. 608, approved August 3, and the regional strike committees in each basin became "committees of workers' control" over implementation.³³

The stage was set for renewed conflict: The government was overcommitted, having promised the miners a package of policy outputs which would be difficult to deliver even with the best of faith (and more abundant resources.) Implementing Resolution 608 would be unwieldy; some 75 ministries, departments, and organizations were reportedly involved in carrying out various of the Resolution's instructions and assignments, and the government itself was functioning with a set of radically new institutions and procedures, (i.e., a genuinely empowered legislature to which ministers were responsible.)³⁴ The miners were, meanwhile, at once demanding and distrustful, expecting to see bureaucratic delays and betrayal of the promises made to them, and ready to strike in response. In mid-August, Kuzbass strike committee leader Avaliani expressed succinctly the miners' mind-set: "We've realized what a mighty

weapon [the strike] is. We don't intend to abuse it, nor do we intend to let it go."³⁵

Throughout the fall, miners periodically threatened or held brief strikes to express dissatisfaction with the state's implementation of the settlement. On August 3, collectives of 17 Kuzbass coal-mining enterprises staged a 2-hour warning strike, sanctioned by the *oblast* strike committee, to protest violations of a July agreement.³⁶ In September, the Regional Alliance of Donbass Strike Committees threatened a strike; in late October a brief warning strike in the Kuzbass involved 20,000 miners, and strikes began in Vorkuta and Inta; on November 1, another brief strike took place in Donetsk. The specific causes of the strikes varied, from violation of ecological demands, to disputes over local registration of strike committees, to miners' belief that the Supreme Soviet was delaying pension reform.³⁷

Workers in a number of other sectors also staged or threatened brief strikes during these months, often echoing the miners' demands. There were work stoppages in the railroad and metal industries; Belorussian potassium miners demanded that they be given the same rights and benefits as the coal miners; the labor collectives of Kirishi enterprises called a one-hour citywide warning strike, against the ineffective appeals of the city's *ispolkom*, to demand closure of a polluting plant.³⁸ The situation was in many ways reminiscent of that in Poland after the initial legalization of Solidarity: workers, distrustful of the government and independently empowered, made heavy use of the strike weapon to enforce their demands and impose their priorities on the national leadership. But, in contrast to the Polish case, the Soviet workers' strike committees were not national, and their alienation from the government was arguably not as deep.

The government's response to the continuing labor unrest was twofold: First, it tried to create 'rules of the game' by establishing a legal framework for industrial conflicts. On October 9, the Supreme Soviet adopted the resolution "On procedures for settling collective labor disputes," which both established and limited the right to strike for Soviet workers. The resolution mandated procedures and time frames for registration of grievances, labor-management negotiations, arbitration, and notification of intent to strike. It also provided for government postponement or suspension of strikes under certain conditions, prohibited strikes in a number of sectors and circumstances, and gave the courts the task of ruling on strikes' legality.³⁹ Gorbachev, citing the 'emergency' situation in industry, sought a 15-month ban on all strikes but was rebuffed by the Supreme Soviet.⁴⁰

Secondly, the government called for a 'constructive dialogue' with the miners. Various central officials, including Ryzhkov, Shchadov, and Voronin regularly

traveled to the basins, met with strike committee leaders, and reported on progress and problems in fulfilling Resolution 608. Officials defended the government's performance, citing large supplemental payments for miners' wages, increased coal prices, draft legislation and high-level commissions addressing workers' demands. They admitted to problems in meeting some commitments to the miners, particularly in material supply, technical retooling, and transport, and argued that some major demands, including the transition to self-financing, must be met gradually. Finally, they pleaded that losses from production stoppages were reducing the resources available for redress of grievances. In mid-November, Ryzhkov tried to clear the air with a meeting in Moscow between leaders from all mining regions and officials. Again, the miners stated their grievances, and Ryzhkov explained what could be done and when. He warned the miners against becoming a "tool of political extremists," and proposed the creation of plenipotentiary commissions in each region, integrated teams of government, workers, and specialists, with leaders authorized by both government and miners. The teams would monitor progress and make adjustments in the implementation process, while workers would make a no-strike commitment. In essence, the Prime Minister was proposing a corporatist structure and mediation process.⁴¹

The government's responses seemed to contain the miners' simmering discontent, except in Vorkuta where a protracted strike closed the Pechora Basin's largest mine for more than five weeks. The strikers had several grievances: slow progress in implementing Resolution 608, refusal of the city *ispolkom* to register the strike committee, and burdensome requirements for receipt of northern bonuses. The strike began in mid-October, and on October 30 the Komi ASSR Supreme Court ruled three labor collectives and their strike committees in violation of the Supreme Soviet resolution on collective labor disputes, and threatened fines and sanctions.⁴² The issue of the strike's legality now became a central focus of the conflict, politicizing the strike and leaving the miners outraged and intransigent. In this first case at least, the legislation intended to mediate and control the strike instead exacerbated it. The conflict continued, with escalating political demands, appeals to higher courts, and a rising pile of claims for breach of contract and fines against the striking mines. It was finally settled on December 2, after various *de facto* and *de jure* concessions, ending unrest in the coal fields for 1989.

Conclusion

We have proposed above several reasons for the massive outbreak of labor unrest in major Soviet coal basins during the summer of 1989. The miners were deeply aggrieved about their living and working conditions, especially long-term neglect of the social sphere. In 1988-89, Gorbachev's economic reforms exacerbated problems of supply and provisioning in mining regions, and raised a potential threat to the economic viability of many mines. At the same time, glasnost facilitated development of the miners' common consciousness of their interests and grievances, while democratization created possibilities for organizing and seeking redress. Finally, in the Soviet Union as elsewhere, the concentration of miners in isolated settlements where they do hard and dangerous work contributes to their solidarity, while the uniquely Soviet "myth of the heroic blue collar worker" helps to account for their militance and sense of righteousness.

The most significant aspect of the summer 1989 strike movement was the miners' pro-reform agenda, their support for enterprise autonomy and self-financing. Their program implies an image of an economy in which the state controls less, and self-managed enterprises seek prosperity through the market and supply-and-demand prices. This program should give us pause, because it calls into question our long-held assumptions about the inherent conservatism and dependent psychology of Soviet blue collar workers. The coal miners, without the benefit of official or intelligentsia leadership (though they were obviously inspired by the center's reform program),⁴³ developed and supported a program based on autonomy, workers' democracy, and markets, because they saw clearly that such policies would serve their collective self-interest. They responded to the new information and new political and economic opportunities brought by reform with a straightforward assessment of their rational self-interest. There is little to suggest that traditional belief systems confined their options or behavior.

We should also realize that the miners' support for reform policies depends on their occupation of a particular niche in the Soviet economy which in turn defines the structure of their opportunities. The miners stand to benefit from reform because of the nature of their product, the certainty of demand for coal on both domestic and international markets. Their proposed solution to their poverty and low profitability depends on their ability to sell coal on hard currency markets, and to buy

products and services for local development on those markets, and is therefore not generalizable in Soviet industry. While a similar strategy might work for other raw-material producing sectors (i.e., oil, gas, perhaps timber), it would provide little benefit for the vast majority of Soviet enterprises whose products are not saleable on international markets. Most Soviet workers do not share the miners' prospects of profiting from economic autonomy, and so we should not expect them to share the miners' pro-reform policy preferences. Rather, we might expect workers' attitudes toward reform to be significantly influenced by their sector's economic opportunity structure, their relative potential to profit from reform policies. The evidence of the miners' strikes suggests that we should put aside our generic conception of a conservative Soviet industrial working class, and look more closely at empirical and structural factors which affect, and differentiate, workers' responses to reform.

Addendum (March 6, 1991)

As we go to press, Soviet miners are again on strike. Warning strikes were held in the Karaganda and Donetsk regions during the first days of March, spreading to the Kuzbass on March 4; Vorkuta miners are planning a strike for March 7. Their grievances, significantly, include the government's failure to fulfill the agreements

which ended the earlier strikes. The miners are making some familiar economic demands, including higher wages, better supplies of consumer goods, attention to ecological concerns. In the Kuzbass, they are also demanding the resignation of Gorbachev, the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the Council of Ministers, and transfer of power to the Federation Council (obviously echoing Boris Yeltsin's recent demands). High-level officials, including Shchadov and Vice President Yanaev, have been sent to the basins to negotiate. The strikes so far have been brief and have involved a minority of mines in each region, but further strikes are threatened.⁴⁴ The situation remains uncertain, but the miners' discontent and activism show no signs of abating.

— Linda J. Cook is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brown University and is currently working on a book entitled *Soviet Workers, Regimes, and the Social Contract: The Soviet Welfare State Under Brezhnev and Gorbachev*. The research for this paper was in part supported by a grant from the Russian Research Center, Harvard University. The author would like to thank especially Donna Bahry and Peter Rutland for comments on earlier drafts, and Mark Kramer and Stephen Shenfield for their prompt assistance.

Notes

¹For statements of this commonly held view, see Timothy J. Colton, "Approaches to the Politics of Systemic Economic Reform in the Soviet Union," in *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April-June, 1987, pp. 166-169; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, "Social Trends," in Robert F. Byrnes, ed., *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980's* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 188-190.

²See *Pravda Ukrainy* (hereafter, *Pr. Uk.*), Oct. 6, 1988, pp. 1,3; Dec. 21, 1988, p. 4; *Izvestiia*, Jan. 5, 1989, p. 1.

³See *Pr. Uk.*, Oct. 12, 1988, p. 3; Dec. 3, 1988, p. 3; Dec. 31, 1988, pp. 1,3.

⁴See *Pr. Uk.*, Jan. 24, 1989, p. 1.

⁵See *Sotsialisticheskaiia Industriia* (hereafter, *Sots. Indust.*), March 28, 1989, p. 2.

⁶*Trud*, March 10, 1989, p. 2.

⁷*Radio Liberty: Report on the USSR* (hereafter, *RL:USSR*), Apr. 27, 1988, pp. 1-4.

⁸This series of six articles was published in *Sots. Indust.*, July 26-Aug. 3, 1988.

⁹See the article by V.S. Shatalov in *Ekonomicheskaiia Gazeta*, No. 7, 1989, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰On election defeats of party secretaries in mining districts see Jerry Hough, "The Politics of Successful Economic Reform," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Jan.-Mar., 1989, pp. 14-15.

¹¹For the text of the draft law, see *Trud*, Apr. 29, 1989, pp. 2-3.

¹²See *Izvestiia*, March 20, 1989, p. 2; *Trud*, May 5, 1989, p. 2.

¹³*Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Soviet Union, Daily Report*, (hereafter, *FBIS:SU*), Apr. 10, 1989, pp. 53-54.

- ¹⁴Quote is from *Trud*, May 5, 1989, p. 2.
- ¹⁵See *Trud*, July 18, 1989, p.1; *FBIS:SU*, July 18, 1989, pp. 67-68.
- ¹⁶See *Pravda*, July 19, 1989, p. 2.
- ¹⁷See *Izvestiia*, July 20, 1989, p. 3.
- ¹⁸*FBIS:SU*, July 20, 1989, pp. 55-57.
- ¹⁹*FBIS:SU*, July 20, 1989, pp. 47, 51.
- ²⁰For the text of the Draft Law on Labor Disputes, see *Izvestiia*, Aug. 16, 1989, p. 1.
- ²¹*FBIS:SU*, July 27, 1989, p. 61.
- ²²See, for example, *Trud*, July 12, 1989, p. 1.
- ²³See *Izvestiia*, July 17, 1989, p. 6.
- ²⁴Quote is from *FBIS:SU*, July 17, 1989, p. 34.
- ²⁵Quote is from *Izvestiia*, July 17, 1989, p. 6.
- ²⁶This is the figure cited by Prime Minister Ryzhkov; see *FBIS:SU*, Aug. 7, 1989, p. 68 (Tass Report).
- ²⁷Quotes are from: *Trud*, July 23, 1989, p.1; *Izvestiia*, July 23, 1989, p.1.
- ²⁸Quote is from an interview with A. Melnikov, First Secretary of the Kemerovo Oblast Party Organization, in *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, Aug. 6, 1989, p. 2.
- ²⁹See the report by David Marples in *RL:USSR*, Sept. 8, 1989, p. 31.
- ³⁰Mervyn Matthews, *Patterns of Deprivation in the Soviet Union Under Brezhnev and Gorbachev*, (Hoover Inst. Press, Stanford, CA), pp. 80-89.
- ³¹See the reports in *RL:USSR*, Aug. 4, 1989, pp. 13-14; Aug. 11, 1989, pp. 10-12.
- ³²See *Izvestiia*, Sept. 6, 1989, p. 3; *Sots. Indust*, Sept. 2, 1989, p. 2; Theodore Friedgut and Lewis Siegelbaum, "Perestroika from Below: The Soviet Miners' Strike and its Aftermath," *New Left Review*, Vol.18, No.1, May/June, 1990, pp. 26-32.
- ³³*Trud*, July 26, 1989, p. 1.
- ³⁴See the interview with Deputy Premier Ryabov in *Pravda*, Nov. 12, 1989, p.3.
- ³⁵Quote is from an interview in *Moscow News*, No. 32, Aug. 6, 1989, p. 8.
- ³⁶See *FBIS: SU*, Aug. 4, 1989, p. 73 (Tass Report).
- ³⁷See *Izvestiia*, Oct. 23, 1989, p. 3; *FBIS: SU*, Nov. 2, 1989, p. 65.
- ³⁸See *Trud*, July 26, 1989, p. 2; Aug. 22, 1989, p. 1.
- ³⁹For the text of the law, see *Pravda*, Oct. 14, 1989, pp. 1-2.
- ⁴⁰See *FBIS: SU*, Oct. 3, 1989, pp. 57-61.
- ⁴¹See *Pravda*, Nov. 19, 1989, p. 2.
- ⁴²*FBIS: SU*, Oct. 30, 1989, p. 61 (Tass Report).
- ⁴³For a differing interpretation, which argues that the miners *did* have intellectual leadership, see Peter Rutland, "The New Workers' Movements in the USSR," in *Soviet Economy* (forthcoming).
- ⁴⁴*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Daily Report*, No.44, March 4, 1991; No.45, March 5, 1991 (both by Dawn Mann).

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